



Street children in Kenya

By Gideon Ochieng IGH Conference, Chicago IL 2015.

Providing Accurate Numbers

- One of the most disputed aspects of knowledge on children living and working on the streets of Nairobi is that related to their numbers.
- In 1999 it was reported that there were over 50,000 street children in Nairobi, and the government estimated that their numbers grew at 10 % per year,
- In 2001 it was stated that conservative estimates indicated that 300,000 children live and work on the streets in Kenya, with over 50% of them concentrated in and around the capital Nairobi.
- In 2001 another report estimated that there were about 40,000 street children in Kenya, with about half concentrated in Nairobi.
- It was estimated in 2007 that there were 250,000- 300,000 children living and working on the streets across Kenya with, with more than 60,000 of them in Nairobi.

The Invisible Girls

- Girls generally tend to be invisible in most of their time in the street.
- A study of street families in Nairobi's central business district commissioned by the NCBDA in 2001 states that boys outnumber girls nine to one.
- However, according to the findings of a study (Women Educational Researchers of Kenya (WERK) for SNV/Kenya and German Technical Cooperation (GTZ)) that covered 12 locales in Nairobi District girls constitute on average about 25 percent of the population of children counted in Nairobi District.
- In Mukuru, Dandora/Maili Saba and Mathare/Eastleigh/Pangani, the proportions are even higher (40%, 31% and 28% respectively).

The Invisible Girls

- As many as 45 percent of the under-five children were found to be females.
- Boys often survive on collecting garbage, and help load and unload market goods, earning them up to 80 KSH (less than US \$1) a day.
- Girls are forced to resort to prostitution in order to get clothes or food.
- According to a 2004 report from The Cradle and The Undugu Society, they earn as little as 10 or 20 KSH (\$0.30-0.50) for each client.

The Age Bracket

- There is dominance of 11 to 15 year olds on the streets of Nairobi, constituting over 50 percent of the children living and working in the streets.
- The children below 5 years old constitute 7 percent of the total.

Education

- Only 39.5 percent of the children counted and interviewed for the above mentioned study were attending school while an overwhelming number of children were not participating in any form of formal or non-formal education.
- A total of 48.5 percent of the girls and 36.5 percent of the boys claimed to be involved in some form of educational programme.
- In Korogocho 56.2 percent of the boys claimed to be going to school.
- The highest number of children who claimed to be going to school fell within the age bracket of 11-15 years translating to 56.71 percent.

Parental Occupation and “Streetism”

- Unemployment among parents of the street children is quite high.
- The few working parents are engaged in menial, poorly paying and often highly labor intensive jobs.
- The implications of this may be many including inability to meet basic family obligations leading to broken homes, high incidences of child neglect and abandonment, absentee parenthood and a tendency to encourage children to obtain employment by any means in order to supplement the family income.
- Most employed mothers are said to be engaged in petty trading while the fathers are reportedly doing more skilled but also unskilled manual work.
- Some parents also engage in household and domestic work, farming, illicit brewing, and begging for a living.
- Others do professional/managerial/technical or clerical work, proprietorship, guarding homes/premises, robbery or engaged in commercial sex work for a living.
- The percentage of girls with non-working parents is higher than that of boys.

Children 'Of' and 'On' the Streets

- Many of the children claim that their parents are either deceased or have abandoned them.
- Abandonment by or death of fathers is found to be more common than abandonment by or death of mothers.
- The implication is that there are more single mothers than there are fathers.

Children 'Of' and 'On' the Streets

- The death of either or both parent and abandonment in turn increases the likelihood of children turning or being turned out to the streets because of limited or no resources for their sustenance within the extended family setting.
- Children either orphaned or abandoned are found to be among those who have found permanent residence on the streets (approximately 14% of the total sample).
- Among the children 'of' the streets, over 65 percent are male. Most of the children who identified themselves fully with the streets are to be found in Mukuru slums and City Centre.

Time spent on the Streets

- About 63 percent of the children have been on the streets either on a part time or full time basis for up to 5 years.
- Over 12 percent have been on the streets for between 6-10 years while another 13 percent cannot remember when they had started to frequent the streets.

Reasons for Streetism

- To earn money, search for food and/or look for recreation— all described in the literature on street children as “pull” factors.
- These “pull” factors are symptomatic for children from economically poor families who suffer from lack of adequate attention and care at home as their parents spend most of their time and energy in securing the mere survival.
- It is also not surprising that “domestic conflicts” and “domestic violence” featured as one key “push” factor for streetism.
- **Significantly** none of the children cite ‘sex’ as a reason for being on the streets.
- It is probable that of necessity rather than on their own volition, once on the streets children are introduced into sexual activity either for recreation or money or they are being forced into it and/or raped.

The Street Sub-Culture

- Once on the streets others initiate the children into streetism in order for them to survive.
- Children's rights are violated constantly as they are often harassed and exploited and they exploit others in turn.
- In absence of adult care and guidance they are forced to assume adult responsibilities and take care of themselves and sometimes their siblings and fellow children at a tender age.
- Out of necessity they have to look for work and they are easy to exploit through meager or sometimes no pay.

The Street Sub-Culture

They are thrust into a bleak, harsh and depraved environment often fraught with constant and sustained danger in various forms such as:

- Harassment
- Violence amongst themselves and towards others
- Drug taking and trafficking
- Sexual exploitation accompanied by a high risk of contracting STIs and HIV/AIDS
- Loneliness and fear

The Street Sub-Culture

- Physical and emotional abuse and neglect
- Starvation
- Exposure to the elements
- Early, unplanned and uncontrolled pregnancy and parenthood
- Poor hygienic and sanitation conditions

The Public Perceptions

- The public and security forces unfairly blame children living and working on the street for theft, robbery and other infractions of the law. Often they are beaten and harassed for real or imagined misdemeanors.
- The younger children, especially boys identify the police as among the persons feared most because they continually harass them.
- Girls fear the older street boys the most because they organize gang rapes sometimes “to teach them a lesson” if they decline to have sex with someone, break up with someone or as mere punishment.
- The girls report that they could be taken advantage of and being gang raped if they merely visit another base and they are known to be unmarried [without a boyfriend protecting them].

The Public Perceptions

- Younger children expressed fears of being stolen/abducted and often feel insecure when strangers approach them. The older girls talk of incidents of colleagues who have been sexually molested and subjected to bestiality. These experiences heighten their sense of insecurity and vulnerability.

Strategies used to combat Homelessness in Kenya

- Kenya has not legislated any single policy on protecting the rights of children working and living in the streets. The government does not have a clear strategy on street children. But there are several policies and working documents on protection of children in general.
- There are approximately 250 organizations working with homeless/street children.
- The key stakeholders have in the past used were offering scholarships to street children, providing vocational training, providing shelter and running a feeding program, guidance and counseling, campaign against drug abuse etc. ...
- Employment and enterprising is the basis on which most people's economic survival rests. Without a job or business, poverty and dependency are inevitable. The African Housing Fund, with other donor organizations, has been funding several projects aimed at increasing the financial ability of mothers of street children.

Strategies used to combat Homelessness in Kenya

- One of these involves a joint self-build and construction materials manufacturing project in Nairobi. The women, who were formerly destitute and in the streets begging with their children, manufacture fibre-reinforced cement tiles and other building components for sale and for use on their own self-built houses close to the factory site,. They have been effective enough to win contracts for supplying large and prestigious projects such as the Koma Rock medium income housing project in Nairobi.
- They have been able to earn enough money to support their children, send them back to school and build their own homes.

Strategies used to combat Homelessness in Kenya

- Other organizations like the Undugu Society also run schools for street children who collect scrap, where the focus is upon the acquisition of basic numeracy. It gives scholarships and assistance to some young people for regular school costs. Apprenticeship with a local artisan is encouraged after completion of the fourth year.
- In the past, the government had given graduates an official certificate and some even continued to train under the auspices of the Kenyan Minister of Culture and Social Sciences. Currently the Ministry of Education is reluctant to recognize the program or the qualifications of its teachers.
- Other approaches are; reaching out to homeless people, appraising their need and connecting or reconnecting them to the health, mental, health, social welfare and housing services that they need.

Strategies used to combat Homelessness in Kenya

- The most basic forms of outreach are the well-known response the world over to those who need food, clothing and overnight accommodation.
- Daytime drop-in centers provide washing facilities, simple meals, and social help.
- Street based HIV/AIDS Education which helps these children to develop a more rational attitude toward the AIDS epidemic, and understanding, rather than fear, toward those afflicted.

How was the strategy developed?

- Most of the intervention has been adopted from best practices of other organizations in the developing countries and other rights agencies like the Consortium for street children, UNICEF and the Big Issue magazine.
- One of the major strides in alternative care is the launch of Guidelines for Alternative Care for Children and Minimum Standards for Charitable Child institutions (CCI's). This was for most part led by the government.

What changes needs to be made?

- It is important for the children, their families and the public at large to know what rights they have and who defends them as these issues are not clear either to the children themselves and their families or, in many instances, to the law enforcement officers who deal with them.
- There should be a better system than mixing children with adults when they are arrested.
- When lawyers are assigned to children, it would probably be better if they were not government employees. They are likely to share the same opinion as the rest of society that these children should be detained and isolated and not rehabilitated.
- Instead, there is a need for more specialized NGOs who can hire dedicated lawyers to look into such matters.

What changes needs to be made?

- Public awareness of children's rights can be increased through many modes of publicity like murals on prominent roads, painted vehicles, T-shirts and publications.
- The Kenyan government should continue to fully adopt the Human Rights Resolution, a holistic approach to the protection and promotion of the rights of children working and/or living on the street. So far there is a positive step towards this direction.

